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La The Rise of Violent Non-State Actors in the Sahel: The Case of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

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Abstract:

Since the end of the cold war, the Sahel region has witnessed a rise of various violent non-state actors (VNSAs), including insurgent groups, terrorist groups, militias, and criminal organizations, which have been affecting the security and stability of every state in the region, and the Sahel region as whole.

This paper attempts to highlight the emergence of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in the Sahel region, it investigates the causes that enabled these armed groups to grow up and thrive, and it also examines the national and regional security implications of the growing presence of those armed groups. In addition, this paper relies on the case of AL-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a prominent violent non-state actor in the Sahel region through highlighting its origins, ideology, objectives, tactics, and its security impact.

Key words:

Violent-non State Actors, Sahel, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Armed groups, Terrorism.

Introduction:

Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) are an important aspect of the contemporary security environment. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, intrastate wars became prevalent on the world stage. These intrastate wars have been fueled by VNSAs that played significant and determinant roles.

VNSAs are coherent, autonomous groups that use violence to achieve their objectives. Thus, they are national and international security threat, particularly since they acquired and developed enough capabilities to carry out strategic attacks even against the most powerful states in the world, and the September 11 attacks against the United States is a prominent example.

Since the end of the cold war, the Sahel region has witnessed a rise of various violent non-state actors (VNSAs), including insurgent groups, terrorist groups, militias, and criminal organizations, which have been affecting the security and stability of every state in the region, and the Sahel region as whole.

For instance, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as a key terrorist group operating in the Sahel region, was responsible for many terrorist attacks in the Sahel and North Africa. Attacks that led to the death of thousands of innocent civilians, including the Radisson Blue Hotel attack in Bamako (November 2015), UN office bombing in Algiers (April 2007), the Splendid Hotel and cappuccino café in Ouagadougou (January 2016) and many other violent attacks.

This study attempts to answer the following question: ***What are the main factors that have driven the emergence and proliferation of VNSAs in the Sahel region since the cold war? And to what extent has that rise affected the security of local states in the region?***

This paper is based on the assumption that the phenomenon of violent non-state actors grew up and flourished in a precarious situation shaped by political authoritarianism, vulnerable economies, poverty, social unrest and a security vacuum in many uninhabited areas, which presented safe havens for numerous armed groups to set up bases for recruit, training and conducting operations. This situation has been deteriorated by external military interventions of the various western powers.

A theoretical framework of VNSAs phenomenon initiates this Study. It tries to define the term, and gives a taxonomy of these important actors in the international security environment. Then, it deals with the different types of VNSAs operating in the Sahel. Next, it explores the evolution of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a key terrorist group operating in the security landscape of the Sahel. It also inquires its origins, objectives, leadership, source of revenue, and the different tactics and strategies that this militant group has used to achieve its objective and expand its activities in the Sahel and beyond. In the end, the different factors that enabled VNSAs to grow up and expand their operations will be outlined.

1. Violent Non-State Actors : Theoretical Framework

This part presents a theoretical framework for the term of violent non-State Actors (VNSAs), which has been a subject of an extreme debates about scholars and analysts in the field of security and strategic studies. It attempts to introduce a comprehensive definition for the term, examines the different types of these actors, and investigates the actors that may explain the growing role of these actors globally in recent decades.

1.1. Definition of Violent Non-State Actors

Armed Groups, Non-State Armed Actors, Violent non-state actors, and Non-State military Actors are common terms often used to refer to a number of non-state actors that use violence to achieve their political, economic or ideological objectives.

There are varied definitions that have been suggested by Scholars and International organizations to VNSAs. This diversity is mainly attributed to the variation of VNSAs' goals, motivations, strategies, ideologies and their relationship with the nation-state. The Federation of American Scientist (FAS) defined VNSA, as "***Organizations that contest the state's legitimate monopoly on the use of violence within a specified geographical territory through direct action.''***[1]

The United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) uses the term non-state armed groups to refer to: "***Groups that have the potential to employ arms in the use of force to achieve political, ideological or economic objectives. They are not within the formal military structures of States, State-alliances or intergovernmental organizations; and are not under the control of the State(s) in which they operate."***[2]

[1] - John Pike, ''Para- States***,'' Federation of American Scientist***. Available from: https://fas.org/irp/world/para/scope.html . Retrieved: March 18, 2018.

[2] - Gerard M. Hugh and Manuel Bessler***, Humanitarian Negotiation with Armed Groups***, New York: United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (January 2006), p. 6.

The International Council on human rights define Armed Groups as: "***groups that are armed and use force to achieve their objectives and are not under State control."***[3]

What it can be drawn from these definitions is that VNSAs are groups of individuals; which have shared interests, objectives, or identity, under a military command, operating independently from the state and its security apparatus, and using violence to achieve their political, ideological, or economic objectives.

1.2. Taxonomy of Violent Non-State Actors :

VNSAs is a comprehensive term that includes a variety of groups that differ in their objectives, strategies, organizational structures, and their relationship with the state and the broader society within which they operate. Based on the criteria of objectives and motivations, VNSAs can be divided into four categories, including Insurgent groups, Terrorist groups, militias, and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). Each category covers various sub-groups.

1.2.1. Insurgent groups:

This category covers all armed groups and movements that are hostile to the existing political status quo, and pursuit to change it and replace it with a "new political reality" that serves their interests, goals, or identity. Violence-which may take different forms such as guerrillas, irregular warfare, and protracted popular wars-, is deemed to be the sole means to achieve such change, as other peaceful political options have proven to be ineffective in conducting that aspired political change.

Three types of armed groups exist within this category, including National liberation movements, rebel groups (or armed opposition groups), and secessionist movements.

a. **National liberation movements:** which are organizations that seek to end up a foreign occupation or overthrow an existing colonial political regime.[4]

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[3] -International Council on Human Rights Policy***, Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups (***Versoix: ICHRP, 2006), p. 5.

[4] - Robbie Sabel, ''Weapons to Non-State Armed Groups : Back to Westphalia ?'' in ***Engaging Non-State Armed Groups***, Geneza: United Nation Institute for Disarmament Research (2008), p. 7.

b. **Armed opposition groups (Rebel groups):** which are groups that seek to overthrow a constituted government, or oppressive regime, or at least gain major political concessions from the existing governments, over critical issues, often pertain identity or language matters.[5]
c. **Secessionist movements:** which seek a separation from the State and becoming an independent or at least an autonomy in a federal State.

1.2.2. Terrorist groups:

Generally, a Terrorist group is defined as a non-State organization that engages in violence against non-combatants in order to accomplish a political or ideological goal or amplify a particular message.[6]
Jessica stern- a terrorism expert- has defined terrorism as: ***"an act or a threat of violence against non-combatant with the objective of exacting a revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience."***[7]
Two main characteristics can be drawn from this definition of terrorism: First, terrorism aims at non-combatants, a characteristic that distinguish them from a legitimate war fighting. Second, terrorist groups use violence for dramatic purpose, due to the fact that spreading fear among audience is more important for them than the physical destruction.

1.2.3. Militias:

Corinna Jentzsch -an assistant professor of International Relations at the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University- refers to militias as: ***"armed groups that operate alongside regular security forces or work independently of the state to shield the local population from insurgents."***[8]

There are two types of militias, which can be drawn from this definition, which are Pro-government militias and informal militias.

a. **Pro-government militias (or Para-military forces)**: They are military groups created by the state or by its inducement for defensive missions

[5] - Phil Williams, ''Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security,'' ***International Relations and Security Network***, ETH Zurich, 2008, p. 12.
[6] - Peter Thompson***, Armed Groups : the 21st Century Threat*** (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p. 81.
[7] - Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, ***ISIS: The State of Terror*** (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2015), p. 10.
[8] -Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, ''Militias in Civil Wars,'' Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 59, no. 5 (April 2017), pp. 755-769

during emergency situations, armed conflicts, or civil wars. Although, these military groups are supported, funded, and equipped by the government, they are not under the military control of the State. Nevertheless, these violent actors are parts of the government's counter-insurgency campaign.[9]

b. **Informal Militias (some refer to them as local self-defense forces):** The formation of this type of militias is a response to the State weakness or inability to provide security to its entire population and safeguard its entire territory. Therefore, they are created by local initiatives of local political entrepreneurs, for security and defensive roles in a hostile environment.[10]

1.2.4. Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs):

Professor Peter Thompson has defined TCOs as: ***"groups that engage in criminal activities by using illegal means such as corruption and violence to further their objectives and protect their operations."*** [11]

For TCOs, crime is the continuation of business by other means, due to the fact that these violent actors seek to maximize their profits by using violence and corruption. Indeed, economic benefits are the primary objective of these groups, in contrast to terrorist or insurgent groups that use violence to achieve exclusively political objectives, such as a political change, a regime change, national liberation, or a separation of a geographical region.

Finally, it is clear that this categorization of VNSAs that while some types of armed groups pursue political objectives like a national independence, a separation of a geographic region, or a political change; other groups' primary objectives are confined to economic benefits (Money and resources).[12] Nevertheless, it should be noted that some politically-driven armed groups may also engage in criminal activities like drug and arms trafficking and smuggling to achieve economic benefits, but their criminal engagement to obtain resources are not their ultimate goal, but to fund their military campaigns. Thus, they are only means to achieve their aspired political objectives. Similarly, Criminal Organizations may look for political influence through making ties with political

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[9] -Chris Alden, Monika Thakur and Matthew Arnold, **Militias and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peace: Silencing the Guns (**New York: Zedbooks), 2011, p. 3.
[10] - Jentzsch and Thakur, ***op. cit.***
[11] -Thompson***, op. cit***., p. 85.
[12] - ***Ibid***., pp. 133-34.

officials or competing in legislative elections, not as their ultimate aim, but as a method to maximize their economic benefits.

1.3. What is behind the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors at the World Stage?

Literatures about VNSA and conflicts have identified numerous factors that led to the emergence and proliferation of various types of armed groups around the world, including the proliferation of weak, failing and failed states, and Globalization.

1.3.1. The proliferation of weak, failing and failed states:

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed a rise of a number of weak, failing or failed states, mostly in Africa and Asia. In addition, more and more states are at risk, exhibiting acute signs of weakness and/or the likelihood of outright failure.

It is Stated in a report entitled "A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility" authored by the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that : *"We cannot counter the various threats that face the International peace and security, without tackling the chronic problem of fragile statehood.''*[13]

This statement implies that the issue of fragile statehood is deeply related to the international security policy. In the same context, Professor Shultz argues that: *"the sources of instability in the 21st century will largely result from a proliferation in the number of weak and failing states.''*[14]

There is a correlation between State weakness and the emergence of one or another type of VNSAs. This is because VNSAs thrive and grow up in a precarious environment characterized by social unrest, security deterioration, and political authoritarianism, internal fragmentation alongside ideological, ethnic or sectarian lines. All these variables are characteristics of States that suffer from weakness or a sort of failure.

Moreover, the inability of States to provide basic political goods for their populations, including security, justice and welfare constitute a momentum for

[13] - UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Threats***, A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*** (New York: United Nation, 2004), p. 1.
[14] - Richard Shultz and all, ''The Sources of Instability in the Twenty-First Century Weak States, Armed Groups, and Irregular Conflict, '' ***Strategic Studies Quarterly (***Summer 2011), pp. 73-94.

armed groups to emerge and fill the gaps left by State's dysfunction and inability. Professor Chest Crocker has summarized this situation as follow : *" Self-interested rulers…progressively corrupt the central organs of government. And they ally themselves with criminal networks to divide the spoils. The authority of the state is undermined… paving the way for illegal operations. In conjunction with these developments, State security services lose their monopoly on the instruments of violence, leading to a downward spiral of lawlessness. Finally, When State failure sets in the balance of power shifts…in favor of armed entities outside the law who find space in the vacuums left by declining or transitional States*."[15]

1.3.2. Globalization:

Globalization is another important factor that may explain the rise of VNSAs globally. It has provided facilitators for VNSAs. It became possible for different VNSAs to reach the necessary means to ensure their survival, enhance their capabilities, and perpetrate their activities, such as illegal markets of arms and weapons which are no longer under the exclusive control of states. Moreover, globalization helped VNSAs to develop new sources of funding, including diasporas, sponsoring states, and making ties and connections with other armed groups from different parts of the world.[16]

Furthermore, the technological advance of communication and transportation means is an important enabler of VNSAs. Various VNSAs use these technological means to spread their narratives and ideologies, for instance, terrorist groups use the internet as a means to spread their ideologies, to radicalize young people, and ultimately to recruit them to fight under their banners. Technological devices like cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices also helped different branches and cells of a given armed group to coordinate their operations, military campaigns, and hearts-and-minds strategies.[17]

2. The emergence of violent non-State actors in the Sahel:

The Sahel is a vast area that stretches from Mauritania to Sudan, bordering the Sahara desert. It is a geopolitical zone that includes Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Niger, and parts of Senegal, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and southern parts

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[15] - Chester Crocker, "Engaging Failing States," ***Foreign Affairs***, September/October 2003, pp. 34-35.
[16] - Rajeev Chaudhry, ''Violent Non-State Actors: Contours, Challenges and consequences,'' ***CLAWS Journal*** (Winter 2013), pp. 167-87.
[17] - Thompson, ***op. cit***., pp. 42-43.

of Algeria. [18]The Sahel region is a huge ‘’ungoverned space” sparsely populated by impoverished communities and loosely controlled by national governments.[19]

The Sahel’s States suffer from chronic weaknesses and structural vulnerabilities concerning governance systems, economic development, and societal cohesion. As a result, the region has faced recurrent challenges and crises, including environmental crisis, food crisis, security deterioration, conflicts, and internal divisions along tribal and ethnic fault lines.[20] Such weaknesses made the emergence of violent non-state actors possible.

Across the Sahel, there is a plethora on VNSAs operating and competing for preeminence, including rebel groups, separatist movements, government aligned militias, criminal networks, and terrorist organizations. These armed groups are key actors in the local dynamics of the Sahel and have largely contributed to the political instability, security deterioration and social unrest that have plagued the region in recent decades.

They have been active in the Sahel since the 1990s. And despite the local and regional efforts to block their rise and limit their influence, some VNSAs have thrived and took control of large swaths of territory. Indeed, they have filled the security vacuum that was a direct result of the weakness of local central governments and the inability of their security forces to restore order and maintain their monopoly over the legitimate use of force.[21]

The size, topography and the open space of the region that includes mountains, caves, as well as porous borders have enabled different VNSAs to grow up, thrive, and sustain their activities away from significant interdiction or surveillance by local security forces.

In order to entrench themselves within local rural communities and obtain their support, various VNSAs have espoused local concerns and

[18] - UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Threats***, A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*** (New York: United Nation, 2004), p. 4

[19] -‘’The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm,’’ International Crisis Group, Africa report 227 (June 2015), p. 1.

[20] -André-Michel Essoungou, ‘’The Sahel: One region, many crises,’’ ***Africa Renewal*** (December 2013) available from: http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2013/sahel-one-region-many-crises Retrieved: April 23, 2018

[21] -Vincent Foucher and Jean Hervé Jezequel, ‘’Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel : Africa’s Jihadists Go Rural,’’ ***International Crisis Group*** (January 2017), Available from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural Retrieved: April 23, 2018.

grievances, provided a sort of governance and service delivery (including food, petrol, and water), and used marriage with indigenous women to build alliances with local tribes.[22]

Moreover, various armed groups have forged mutually beneficial links with each other, in order to sustain their operations, to have access to alternative sources of funding, and to limit the effectiveness of military efforts of local and international actors to degrade their capabilities and neutralize their roles. That is why lines between those armed actors are often blurred, as individuals may belong to several categories simultaneously. For instance, separatists in northern Mali have built alliance with AQIM and its offshoots to increase their capabilities and military effectiveness in order to consolidate their power on the ground. At the same time, AQIM has enhanced its ties with criminal, Norco-trafficking, and smuggling networks to have an access to alternative sources of revenue to fund its operations and terrorist activities. Such ties are referred by various literature as '' Terror-Crime Nexus".[23]

Consequently, VNSAs have expanded their influence, carried out high-profile attacks, and seized control of strategic towns in many parts of the Sahel, including Northern Mali and Northeast of Nigeria.

2.1. Militias and Insurgent groups in the Sahel:

This category involves politically-motivated armed groups, or those violent actors that have been mobilized along ethnic, clan, class identities, or around broader political agendas. [24] Most of those armed groups centered in Mali, including a loose coalition of pro-government militias seeking decentralization within a unified national system, and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, which is a separatist movement of ethnic Tuareg formed in October 2011 with a goal of a greater autonomy of the northern part of Mali.[25]

2.2. Transnational Criminal Organizations in the Sahel:

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[22] - Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, ''Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Financial Assessment,'' ***Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance*** (December 2017), p. 4.
[23] - Peng Wang, ''the Crime-Terror Nexus: Transformation, Alliance, Convergence,'' ***Asian Social Science***, Vol. 6, No. 6 (June 2010), pp. 11-20.
[24] -Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 14.
[25] - ''Mali and the Sahel-Sahara: From Crisis Management to Sustainable Strategy,'' ***International Peace Institute*** (February 2013), p. 2.

The Sahel has been crisscrossed by trading routes that link key towns with smaller hubs and way stations. Thus, the region is a pivotal area for organized crime that has seen booming revenues in the last two decades. Smuggling, kidnapping for ransom and Norco-trafficking are activities involved in by different individuals and networks for their rapid enrichment. Many of those networks have converted their wealth acquired by criminal activities into political influence and military power.[26]

The availability of new technologies such as GPS navigation systems and satellite phones enabled traffickers and provided them with an edge in catching commodities and evading detection and disruption. As a result, trafficking of illicit goods has expanded dramatically in recent decades.

In addition, it is noteworthy that some Sahel's senior officials allowed their allies to benefit from criminal activities. Such complicity from local governments enabled criminal networks to sustain their activities and maximize their profits, as well as it hampered regional efforts to counter organized crime in the region.[27]

2.3. Terrorist Groups in the Sahel:

Terrorist groups are key actors in the local dynamics of the Sahel. They use the language of reforms and religious purification to mobilize adherents against corrupt rulers and challenge the established order, in order to build out their zones of influence and protection.[28] These groups include: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its various affiliates and offshoots that are concentrated in north-western Africa like Al-Mulathamoun, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA); and Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria.

VNSAs have had devastating effects on human security in the Sahel; they were behind the death of thousands of people and millions of internally and externally displaced populations.[29] Moreover, these armed actors have disrupted health and educational services in many areas in the Sahel, devastated local

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[26] - Wolfram Lacher, ***organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region*** (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), p. 4.
[27]- Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 10.
[28] - ***ibid.,*** p. 13.
[29] - '' The Sahel: Converging Challenges, compounding risks,'' ***Humanitarian Response***, May 2016. Available from: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/west-and-central-africa/document/sahel-converging-challenges-compounding-risks-region
Retrieved: April 23, 2018.

infrastructures, and discouraged foreign companies from directly investing in the region as well.

The presence of VNSAs itself have prompted local governments to shift significant budget allocations to security and military sectors at the expense of other socio-economic sectors.

3. Causes and factors behind the rise of Violent non-State actors in the Sahel:

Numerous overlapping factors can explain the growing role of VNSAs in the security and political landscape of the Sahel. Since their national independence, the Sahel's States have suffered from structural vulnerabilities, which represent a fertile ground for VNSAs to grow up and strive. These vulnerabilities can be outlined as follow:

3.1. Poor economic development:

The Sahel's States have been for many years at the very bottom of all economic performance indexes, including GDP, economic growth, foreign currency reserves, employment, direct foreign investment, and standard of living. Such records were mainly a result of mismanagement and corruption of central governments in the region.

Although the Sahel's economies rely primarily on agriculture, which contributes heavily to GDP of the region, it remains underdeveloped and dependent on 2 to 4 months of rainfall a year.[30]Moreover, agriculture is very sensitive to environmental degradation that has plagued the region in last decades, and has contributed to crop failure, soil salinity, and collapsed fisheries.

Furthermore, the current economic situation in the Sahel is a result of instability and security deterioration, which led to the disruption of trade and agricultural activities, the devastation of economic infrastructure, and the undermining of the investment climate in the region. A high rate of unemployment, an increasing poverty among young Sahel's populations were the consequence.

[30] - André-Michel Essoungou, ''The Sahel: One region, many crises,'' ***Africa Renewal*** (December 2013) available at: http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2013/sahel-one-region-many-crises Retrieved: October 15, 2018.

Consequently, unemployment, poverty, and lack of hope and opportunities have led to a frustration among youths and made them vulnerable to radicalization or involvement in criminal activities, As well as they make the youths vulnerable to join VNSAs, given the fact that being a member of an armed groups means a reliable source of income, protection, and social status.[31]

In addition, VNSAs in turn, have exploited local concerns and grievances to gain support from local communities and justify their political or economic narratives. The UN economic commission for Africa states in its report ''Conflict in the Sahel region'' stated that: ***'' the mismanagement and its resultant issues of unemployment, socioeconomic deprivation and unresolved grievances mutate into a violent opposition to the State, strengthens the narratives of extremist groups and provide justification for their cause.''*** [32]

3.2. Poor governance throughout the Sahel:

Sahel's successive governments have proved ineffectiveness and inability to impose their will and retain monopoly of violence due to the absence of strong security forces, strong institutions, and just democratic processes.[33]

Nigeria, Mali, Chad, and Mauritania have all been plagued by political authoritarianism, repression, and periods of military rules. For instance, Mali descended into armed conflict in 2012, Mauritania has experienced decades of military rule, and Niger has experienced four military coups, four political transitions, and seven republics.

In addition, the Sahel's States have suffered from Corruption that was notoriously high at all levels of governments. Many corrupt officials have complicated with criminal networks to consolidate their power and acquire economic gains. On the other hand, much of money allocated for health, education, and infrastructures does not reach its intended recipients.[34]

Weak democratic norms and institutions combined with corruption have led to weak government performance and poor service delivery, which have discredited the legitimacy and ''reason d'être'' of regional governments in the eyes of their populations. Therefore, VNSAs have attempted to exploit these

[31] - '' The Sahel : Converging Challenges, compounding risks,'' Humanitarian Response, ***op. cit.***
[32] - ''Conflict in the Sahel Region and the Developmental Consequences,'' **UN Economic Commission for *Africa,*** Addis Ababa: UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2017, p. 23.
[33] - Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 96.
[34] - ***Ibid***., p.6.

weaknesses to justify their political cause and gain local support through provision of basic needs to local populations, including petrol, water, and foodstuff.

3.3. Historical grievances and exclusionary policies of the Sahel's governments:

Socio-political or economic exclusion of a segment of a local society, whether a sect, an ethnic group or a tribe; by national governments is one of the main causes of armed conflicts and civil wars around the world.

When a certain local community perceives that it is marginalized, politically or economically, and less protected by the central governments in a hostile environment, it begins to look for another source for protection and governance, which would be the primordial affiliation group, whether a tribe, a clan, a sect, or an ethnic group. In this regard, figures or local communities articulate such marginalization and grievances in a narrative and develop an opposition agenda against the State to gain major political concessions like autonomy through political means, or armed violence, which would be a continuation of politics by other means.

To varying degrees, grievances are a key factor that has complicated inter-groups relations and political dynamics of State building processes across the Sahel. [35]For instance, the concentration of power in Mali's southern region has been a source of enduring grievance and distrust for communities in the north since the colonial era. The Touareg hostility towards the political elites in Bamako has erupted in full-scale rebellion in 1962, 1992, and 2012.

Instead of a genuine devolution of power by giving more authorities and resources to local institutions-as it was mentioned in the 1990s peace agreement-successive governments in Bamako have sought to preserve resources and manage the north by supporting local militias to exploit ethnic divisions, using patronage and local administrative appointments to co-opt and maintain allies, and colluding with trafficking networks in the north. [36]

[35] - ''Conflict in the Sahel Region and the Developmental Consequences,'' UN Economic Commission for *Africa**, op. cit.,*** p21.
[36] - Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 7.

Moreover, the inability of States to respond to the deep-rooted grievances has exacerbated the problems, which have escalated and displayed in the spread of terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel. In this context, the UN economic commission for Africa stated: "***Exclusionary policies and political repression associated with politicized security establishment is an important trigger for instability and insecurity in the Sahel.''*** [37]

Such a problem is mainly a result of state's inability or unwillingness to create a comprehensive national identity that contains all segment of a given society, and undermines other narrow affiliations.

3.4.The spill-over of the 2011 Libyan civil war:

The security of Sahel's States is tied to regional and transnational security dynamics, with some States more susceptible to these dynamics than others. The chaos and instability in Libya since 2011 seemed to be the biggest opportunity of VNSAs, including AQIM to increase their military capabilities and expand their influence. The break out of the 2011 Libyan civil war led to the proliferation of huge quantities of weapons due to the disintegration of the Qaddafi's regular forces, and the seizure of the Qaddafi army's stockpiles by armed opposition groups. Those Libyan weapons that have been circulating in the Sahel rang from light to heavy weapons, including surface-to-air missiles.[38]

Since that time, AQIM and its affiliates in the Sahel have equipped with a large amount of Libyan weapons such as man-portable air defense system, heavy mortars, artillery, and thousands of ant-tanks mines. Such new capabilities enabled AQIM and its offshoots to carry out high-profile attacks in the Sahel. The 2012 Malian rebellion and Algeria's gas facility attack are evident examples.

4. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Origins, Objectives, and Strategy

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a terrorist organization operating in the Sahel region and parts of the Maghreb. It was responsible for many terrorist attacks in the Sahel and north Africa that led to the death of thousands of innocent civilians, including the Radisson Blue Hotel attack in Bamako (November 2015), UN office bombing in Algiers (April 2007), the

[37] - ***Ibid***., p22.
[38] - ''The Online Trade of Light Weapons in Libya,'' ***Small Arms Survey***, Dispatch No. 6, (Geneva: April 2016), pp. 4-6.

Splendid Hotel and cappuccino café in Ouagadougou (January 2016) and many other violent attacks.

Despite the setbacks that have inflicted on AQIM over past decades because of the various counter-terrorism measures adopted by regional and international actors, the group has shown remarkable continuity and resilience.

4.1.The Evolution of AQIM:

AQIM's origin goes back to the ''Armed Islamic Group (GIA),'' a terrorist group that have carried out notoriously brutal attacks and atrocities against civilians during the 1990s Algerian armed conflict.–The brutality of the GIA led several GIA's commanders to defect in 1998 to found the '' Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)'' that renounced the GIA policy of slaughtering civilians, vowing to concentrate attacks only against the Algerian regular security forces.[39]

GSPC led by Hassan Hattab had continued the struggle to topple the Algerian ''apostate'' regime that have adopted a counter-terrorism strategy to significantly impeding GSPC operations and limit its strategic effectiveness.

In order to retain its relevance and improve recruiting and fundraising, GSPC sought an alliance with Al-Qaeda core and a close relationships with its affiliates, like Al-Qaeda in Iraq that was led by Abu-Mossaab al-Zarkaoui, whom Abde-El-Malek Droukdal worked with to establish routes and training camps with the goal of bringing volunteers from the Maghreb to join the insurgency in Iraq. [40]

On September 11, 2006, Aymen al-Zawahiri, the second man in Al-Qaeda core at that time, announced in a videotaped statement the merger of GSPC with Al-Qaeda. Shortly after, GSPC announced that it had rebranded itself to be '' Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb". [41]Such a merger had had effects on the group's objectives, tactics and strategy.

Thereafter, AQIM have launched numerous attacks including suicide bombings, kidnapping for ransom and assassinations. Those attacks prompted an

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[39] - J. Filiu, ''the Local and Global Jihad of AQIM,*'' The Middle East Journal*, vol. 63, N. 2 (2009), pp. 213-26.

[40] - William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, ***Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*** (Washington DC: Center of Strategic and International Studies, 2011), pp. 3-4.

[41] - Sergei Boeke, ''AQIM: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime? ,''***Small Wars and Insurgencies***, vol. 27, n. 5 (2016), pp. 914-36.

increasing aggressive counter-terrorism strategy, which was able to shift AQIM's area of operation from Algeria's Mediterranean coast to the Sahara and Sahel region within which it launched attacks against foreign interests and tourists, and engaged in criminal activities including kidnapping, smuggling, and trafficking of illicit goods to fund their operations and sustain itself.[42]

In addition, AQIM has reportedly coordinated with criminal networks and similar terrorist groups in the region, including Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's Al-Shabab, with arms and funds flowing among them.[43]

AQIM have suffered from internal cleavages and leadership rifts over strategy, tactics, ideological focus, and lines of responsibility. Those internal rivalries led to various offshoot groups, including ''the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA)'' that broke off from AQIM in 2011, and ''the Mokhtar bel-Mokhtar's Masked Brigade'' in late 2012, which attacked the Algerian-based Tigentourine gas facility in Ain-Amenas in January 2013. [44] Shortly after the Ain-Amenas attack, Belmokhtar merged his Masked Brigade with faction of MOJWA, creating Al-Mourabitoune.

After the Fall of Libya's Qaddafi regime in 2011, a newly emboldened National movement for the Liberation of Azawad launched a military campaign to push the Malian regular forces out of northern Mali, and seized control of key three Malian towns of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, declaring the independent state of Azawad. [45]AQIM, MUJWA, and Ansar al Dine had aided the rebellion and made cause with NMLA against the Malian government. Subsequently, those terrorist groups marginalized Touareg forces and drove them out of the three major towns. [46]

In January 2013, AQIM and its allies' attack and control of the city of Konna as a step to move their control southward, had provoked a French military intervention to halt their advance. The French operation Serval, supported by Malian troops, ECOWAS forces and other western countries, ended the Tuareg rebellion, liberated northern Mali, and inflicted serious losses in personnel and

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[42] - Alta Grobbelaar and Hussein Solomon, '' The Origin, Ideology and Development of AQIM,'' ***Africa Review***, vol. 7, n. 2 (2015), p. 151.
[43] - Laub, Masters, ***op. cit.***
[44] - Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 22.
[45] - Grobblelaar and Solomon***, op. cit.,*** p. 153.
[46] - Laub, Masters, ***op. cit.***

weaponry of those terrorist groups. (700 terrorists were killed, 400 were arrested, and 200 tons of arms and ammunition were destroyed).[47]

Despite the losses, AQIM has shown an ability to recover from setbacks and enhance its capabilities through a network of alliances and ties with criminal groups or local communities. After a period of relative quiescence, AQIM and its offshoots reasserted themselves through high-profile attacks on the Radisson Blue in Bamako in 2015, and the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou in 2016. [48]

4.2.AQIM's Objectives:

In an interview with New York Times in 2008, Droukdal, the leader of AQIM, laid out AQIM's objectives and ideology. He stated: "***our general goals are the same goals of Al-Qaeda, and you know them. As far as our goals concerning the Islamic Maghreb, they are plenty. But the most important is to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people.'' [49]***

AQIM has not fundamentally changed its strategic goals from those of former GIA or GSPC. Thus, AQIM's objectives includes: ridding North Africa of western influence, toppling local governments deemed apostate, and installing regimes governed by Sharia Islamic laws.

Some analysts argue that AQIM's main objective is to gain economic benefits through criminal activities. Though, there is little evidence that supports the view that AQIM is a criminal organization behind a religious facade. Indeed, AQIM's involvement in criminal activities is a way to acquire funding in order to fund its terrorist activities, and sustain its operations.

AQIM distinguishes between ''near enemy'', which are the local Sahel's government that have been repeatedly struck by AQIM and its offshoots, and the ''far enemy'' including France, USA, and other western powers that have invaded the Muslim world, stolen their wealth, and propped up ''apostate regional

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[47] - Boeke, ***op. cit.,*** p. 914.
[48] - Cooke, Sanderson, ***op. cit.,*** p. 23.
[49] - '' An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel,'' ***New York Times***, July 1, 2008. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html Retrieved: October 12, 2018.

regimes. Therefore, AQIM has attacked western interests in the Sahel in many occasions.[50]

4.3. AQIM's Leadership, organization, and area of operation:

The Central AQIM's leadership is comprised of 14-member shura council, led by Abd-el-Malek Droukdal, regional commanders and the heads of political, military, judicial, and media committees.[51] The group is divided into Katibas (brigades) which are organized in independent cells. AQIM's leadership is believed to be trained in Afghanistan during the 1979-1989 war against the Soviet occupation.

Droukdal still appears to lead the entire groups. However, the leaders of various brigades seem to operate with a sort of autonomy, particularly those leaders operate further away from AQIM. [52] It has suffered from internal differences and rivalries, thus it is the mother of several violent offshoots, including Al-Mourabitoune, Ansar al Dine, MOJWA, and the newly formed terrorist group ''Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin''.

AQIM and its offshoots and affiliates have been active in multiple countries across North Africa and the Sahel. Its attacks have been primarily concentrated in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.[53]

AQIM's area of operation has been divided into two sectors, including the central emirate which is located in the Northern part of Algeria in the mountainous Kabylie region, where AQIM's leadership was based; and the Sahel Emirate in northern Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, which constitute a safe haven for different VNSAs like AQIM. [54]

It should be noted here that the successful Algerian counter-terrorism campaign forced AQIM to shift its center on operation to the Sahara-Sahel region, where the group found a sanctuary due to the size, open space and the topography of the region that includes mountains, desert, and caves that enabled AQIM to set up bases of training, recruit and operations.

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[50] - Boeke, ***op. cit.,*** p. 921.
[51] - ***Ibid***., p. 922.
[52] - Laub, Masters, ***op. cit.***
[53] -''Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its related Groups,'' ***Congressional Research Service***, March 2017, p. 2.
[54] - Boeke, ***op. cit.,*** p. 922.

4.4. AQIM's Sources of funding:

AQIM has been engaging in various criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and trafficking of illicit goods, in order to ensure its survival and sustain its operations to achieve its goals. [55]Although Crime is forbidden under the Islamic law, AQIM's involvement in organized crime is to compensate the lack of other major alternative sources of funding.[56]

Smuggling: smuggling has been always a large part of local livelihood, for instance, border areas in Mali relies on goods that come from Algeria. AQIM and its offshoots smuggle arms, petrol, foodstuffs, clothes, and cigarettes that represent a large share of the contraband. [57]

Drug Trafficking: Drug trafficking has flourished in the Sahel as a result of numerous factors, including the complicity of some senior political and security officials of local governments, particularly Malians during the reign of president Toumani Amado Touré (2001-2012), which has facilitated the passage and transportation of Narcotics through obscuring law enforcement efforts.

There is little evidence that support the allegations that AQIM have directly involved in drug-trafficking, instead, it has imposed fees and taxes or criminal networks going through their control territory, or providing security escorts for narco-networks in many occasions.[58]

Kidnapping for Ransom: It was AQIM's main source of income for a good part of time. Since 2003, around 60 hostages have been released in exchange of amount of money paid mainly by western countries, particularly, Switzerland, France, and Spain. According to a New York Investigation, at least 91 million dollars have been pain to AQIM and its partners between 2008 and 2014.[59]

This has led to a vicious cycle where each release provides an incentive for another hostage-taking. In addition, if States do not pay large ransoms to release their citizens, it would enormously affect AQIM's ability to sustain its operations and would end the trend of continuing hostage-taking in the Sahel. Therefore, the

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[55] - ''Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its Related Groups,'' ***op. cit.,*** p.2.
[56] - Thornberry, Levy, ***op. cit.,*** p. 4.
[57] - Fanusie and Entz, ***op. cit.,*** p. 3.
[58] - Wolfarm***, op. cit.,***p. 4.
[59] - '' Paying Ransoms, Europe bankrolls Qaeda Terror,'' ***New York Times***, July 29, 2014. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html

stance of Algeria, UK, and USA to not pay ransoms under no circumstances is a wise stance. [60]

As a result of the increasing funding, AQIM was able to acquire sophisticated equipment such as GPS-encrypted communication equipment and vehicles, which in turn allowed the group to operate with a high degree of mobility and coordination in the desert.[61]

4.5. AQIM's Strategy and Tactics:

In order to achieve its objectives, AQIM and its affiliates have been following different strategies and tactics depending on available resources and the strategic environment within which they operate.

It has been using different guerilla tactics, by targeting government and military installations, foreign personnel, and western interests through using ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, or sudden attacks, in order to put psychological pressure on local governments and discredit their military capabilities in the eyes of local populations.

Moreover, AQIM and its offshoots have used terrorism in many occasions through indiscriminate attacks against civilians, suicide bombings, kidnapping, and targeted assassination, with the purpose to spread fear among Sahel's populations, and acquire International Media attention in order to spread its narrative worldwide.

AQIM also used an insurgency tactic of obtaining popular support for their cause, through making good relationship with local populations and figures or providing a sort of governance. AQIM embedded itself within local communities through various measures including providing governance, delivering basic needs for local communities such as water, petrol, and foodstuff; and respect of local customs.[62]

The popular support is essential in the success of any insurgency, for instance, AQIM's good relationships with rural communities that have weak

[60] - Fanusie and Entz, ***op. cit.,*** p. 6.
[61] - Thornberry, Levy, ***op. cit.,*** p. 6.
[62] - Fanusie and Entz, ***op. cit.,*** p. 6.

attachment to the States provided them with bases for recruitment from the impoverished desert youths, and freedom of movement in the broader Sahel.[63]

Conclusion:

In the end, this research paper has reached a set of conclusions that are outlined as follow:

- The growing role of VNSA represents one of the main challenges to security, stability, and prosperity of every State in the Sahel region.
- The increasing role of VNSAs in the Sahel region has prompted a growing direct involvement of External powers in the internal dynamics and domestic affairs of the Sahel region.
- The transnational nature of VNSAs in the Sahel makes a need for a cooperative and comprehensive strategy between the regional States of the Maghreb to combat these violent actors and eliminate their disastrous effects on their stability, security and prosperity.
- While the formation of VNSAs is a result of State weakness/failure, they in turn contribute and deepen the State weakness and dysfunction.
- The rise of VNSAs in the precarious Sahel region is attributed to numerous, including political authoritarianism, vulnerable economies, poverty, social unrest and security vacuums in many uninhabited areas, which presented safe heavens for numerous armed groups to set up bases for recruit, training and conducting operations.

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